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HUNGARY: Election Campaign Heating Up

Polls indicate the pro-Western, market-oriented Free Democrats may be best placed to head a coalition that would form Hungary's first non-Communist government in more than 40 years after the election on 25 March.

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The liberal Alliance of Free Democrats has caught up with the centrist Hungarian Democratic Forum, according to Hungary's untested public opinion polls. The ruling Socialists—the renamed and reformed Communists—continued their slide; they and the hardline Communist Party receive high negative ratings from voters, practically eliminating any chance of a rebound. More than 40 percent of the voters remain undecided, however, and support for the new parties is weak among those who claim to have made up their minds.

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The new opposition parties have all rejected coalition with the Socialists. Democratic Forum and Free Democrat leaders have said they will form a coalition with each other only if they have no alternative. The rural-based independent Smallholders—whose price for coalition is acceptance of a scheme designed to return land to its pre-1948 owners—may hold the balance of power. It leans toward the Free Democrats but is also open to joining with the Forum.

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Comment: Voters, demoralized over the sagging economy and skeptical of the reform parties' ability to deliver on platform commitments, will be slow to make up their minds. The well-funded and well-organized Free Democrats appear to have a good chance of winning a plurality, but the polls indicate a coalition of at least three parties will be required to form a working majority in the legislature, suggesting protracted wrangling before a new government is formed.

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